

War report analyzes Soviet, Hanoi stance

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Washington—A secret 1969 report on the Vietnam war said the Russians were playing a key role as mediator in the Paris peace talks and that the North Vietnamese were negotiating seriously.

Neither point has been fully reflected in public statements by the Nixon administration.

Although it has been generally believed that the Russians were trying to facilitate peace talks, the full text of the report documents for the first time the depth and significance of the Soviet role.

And while the report suggests Hanoi's public intransigence was merely one aspect of a serious bargaining stance, Nixon administration officials have repeatedly denounced the North Vietnamese for waging a propaganda war in Paris.

These disclosures are among a long list of items covered in National Security Study Memorandum 1, a 548-page document written in January and February of 1969 and bearing a "secret" classification.

It consists of 28 questions directed by Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon's national security adviser, to government agencies involved with the Vietnam war, the detailed answers of the agencies and a summary

apparently written by Dr. Kissinger.

The summary chapter says there is "general agreement" among the agencies on the following points:

1. "It is not certain" that the Saigon government "will be able to survive a peaceful competition" with the Viet Cong for political power.

2. "All agree" that the South Vietnamese Army "could not now, or in the foreseeable future, handle both the VC [Viet Cong] and sizable NVA [North Vietnamese Army] forces without U.S. combat support," including artillery, aircraft and some ground troops.

3. The North Vietnamese would be able to induct new soldiers faster than the United States and South Vietnam could kill them. The report says the casualty rate had continued.

4. "The enemy is not in Paris primarily out of weakness."

These conclusions from the report's summary are based on hundreds of pages of detailed analysis by American officials in South Vietnam and in such Washington agencies as the State Department, Defense Department and the Central Intelligence Agency.

On an extraordinary number of other points these agencies were at loggerheads, and frequently various sections of the same agency disagree with each other. Moreover on a startlingly high number of issues, including the South Vietnamese political situation and civilian casualties, the authors confess to having little reliable data.

On a wide range of issues the federal establishment divided neatly into two camps, optimists and pessimists. Although appearing objective, the summary chapter generally gave slightly greater weight to the pessimists.

The lineup of optimists and pessimists varied somewhat from issue to issue. But in general the optimists included the American Military command and embassy in Saigon, the Pacific command in Hawaii, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington.

As a rule the pessimists included the CIA, the State Department and the office of the Secretary of Defense.

Two points that the summary, unlike the agency reports, make with clarity are the doubtful prospects of an American victory and the hypothetical nature of the "domino theory," which holds that a North Vietnamese victory might topple non-Communist regimes elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

"No agency clearly forecasts a 'victory' over the Communists and all acknowledge the manifold problems facing the GVN [Government of South Vietnam] as we withdraw," the summary states.

Concerning the domino theory, the summary says judgments rest on "tangible evidence," then adds that all the agencies

"reject the view that an unfavorable settlement in Vietnam will inevitably be followed by Communist takeovers outside Indochina."

Majority view

A majority of the agencies endorsed the view expressed in the National Intelligence Estimate 50-68:

"A settlement which would permit the Communists to take control of the government in South Vietnam, not immediately but within a year or two, would be likely to bring Cambodia and Laos into Hanoi's orbit at a fairly early stage, but these developments would not necessarily unhinge the rest of Asia."

The reports contain some intriguing statistics on the military and pacification situation as of early 1969.

According to the CIA, less than one per cent of the nearly 2 million allied small unit operations conducted in the preceding two years had resulted in contact with the enemy. The percentage for South Vietnamese operations was one tenth of one per cent.

The CIA also concluded that the Viet Cong had "a significant effect on at least two-thirds of the rural population." The office of the Secretary of Defense put the figure at 50 per cent, and some other agencies asserted it was even lower.

The Defense Secretary's office—consisting of Secretary Melvin R. Laird and his largely civilian advisers—also said the Saigon government controlled no more of the population than it had in 1962, which the author of the summary called "a discouraging year."

The issue in the report that generates the most controversy and the least light is that of the effectiveness of bombing. One camp finds it significantly effective, the other describes it at best as marginally useful and at worst as counterproductive.

The military continued to urge an expansion of bombing in both Vietnams, Laos and Cambodia, while most of the civilian agencies in Washington took the opposite position.

Military officers in Saigon and Washington said "a vigorous bombing campaign could choke off enough supplies to bring the VC to a halt," while the CIA and Pentagon civilians saw North Viet-

nam as "continuing the struggle even against unlimited bombing."

The only agreement about the effectiveness of B-52 strikes was that there was insufficient data to analyze them. "The consensus," however, was that they were "very effective when directed against known enemy troop concentrations or in close support of tactical operations."

B-52 strikes against infiltration routes or enemy base camps, however, were described as "much less effective."

Considerable evidence

There was also wide disagreement in the report on the number of casualties inflicted on the enemy by the B-52's. Nor could the agencies agree on whether the bombing campaign to interdict the flow of supplies down Laotian and Cambodian jungle trails had succeeded.

One major thread running through the report is the importance of the program, launched in the last year of the Johnson administration, of "modernization" of the South Vietnamese armed forces.

There is considerable evidence in the report that the Nixon administration's "Vietnamization" program was little more than a continuation and possible acceleration of this "modernization" drive.

Both programs apparently even had the same target date—1972. The Vietnamization program, however, appears to be slightly more ambitious than its predecessor.

Completion in 1972

While the goal of the Johnson program was to allow Saigon to deal with the Viet Cong without American help, at least the interim aim of Vietnamization, as described by American officials recently, is to allow the South Vietnamese to confront both Viet Cong and North Vietnamese with the help of American air power, logistics and artillery, but without American infantry.

Thus American military officers in Saigon, Hawaii and the Pentagon say the South Vietnamese Army, under the modernization program in effect in January, 1969, "would not be able to handle the highly indigenous VC forces without U.S.

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Approved For Release 2001/03/04 : CIA-RDP80-01601R000300350071-6

U.S. Knew Little of Hanoi's Intentions

By Stanley Karnow

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In early 1969, more than seven years after the United States made its initial major commitment to defend South Vietnam, the American agencies engaged in prosecuting the war still knew virtually nothing about the Communist enemy's leaders and their intentions.

At that time, moreover, these various U.S. agencies often disagreed among themselves in their evaluations of North Vietnamese and Vietcong military, political and diplomatic policies and practices.

The extent to which the American specialists directing the U.S. war effort lacked hard intelligence to guide their operations is reflected in a secret study compiled by White House adviser Henry Kissinger's staff not long after President Nixon took office.

Contributors to the study, which was made public this week, included the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Pacific command in Honolulu, the U.S. military and civilian missions in Saigon, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Defense and State Departments.

An official U.S. expert said yesterday that there has been "no real improvement" in the available intelligence on Hanoi and the Vietcong since the White House study was assembled more than three years ago.

"We probably know less about North Vietnam than any country in the world," the official remarked, explaining that the U.S. intelligence community relies almost exclusively for information about Hanoi on published Communist statements and captured documents.

Several observers of the Vietnam conflict have attributed U.S. miscalculations over the years to persistent failures by successive administrations to understand the Communist hierarchy and its workings.

The different contributors to the 1969 study cited their limited knowledge of

the Communists. "Our knowledge of the internal personalities, workings and divisions (in Hanoi) is in fact very limited and speculative," said the State Department. The Defense Department concurred: "As far as our knowledge of how Hanoi thinks and feels, we see through a glass darkly, if at all."

A summary of the study said the contributors agreed that their intelligence on the existence and significance of "possible factions" within the North Vietnamese leadership was "imprecise". Nevertheless, the contributors tried to define the rival Hanoi factions, and their assessments varied.

The State Department was inclined to consider Le Duan, the present First Secretary of Hanoi's Lao Dong (Workers' Party), as a relative moderate while the Pentagon described him as a "militant" who favored "an extreme and aggressive approach to both foreign and domestic policy."

These U.S. analysts, according to a summary of the study, also "set forth sharply conflicting" estimates of Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, the architect of France's Indochina defeat in 1954 and currently Hanoi's leading strategist.

The U.S. agencies agreed, however, that it was inaccurate to divide the Communist leaders into "pro-Peking" and "pro-Moscow" groups. As the CIA noted: "In competing for influence, Peking and Moscow tend to cancel each other out."

The contributors agreed as well that North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh was then acting, as the State Department put it, like a "chairman of the board, casting the deciding vote in case of disputes but letting others air their views". Ho died in September 1969.

In retrospect, the lack of information about the Communists' internal workings prompted some of the con-

tributors to the study to misinterpret North Vietnamese moves.

Explaining the Communists' behavior at the Paris peace talks, the State Department said that they were "negotiating under pressure" and would be compelled to "modify their own terms and conditions over time". The U.S. Embassy in Saigon echoed that thesis, saying "the prospects on the ground are bleak enough for them so that they will, in the end, make significant concessions".

Speculating on possible concessions the Communists might make, the embassy suggested that they "may even" abandon their efforts to gain a "favorable political settlement in the negotiations." Until now, however, the Communists have shown no disposition to compromise.

The Defense Department estimated that the North Vietnamese and Vietcong went to the conference table in Paris because they realized that they "cannot win a war through large-scale, offensive military actions."

In an assessment that seems to have contradicted by the present Communist drive, the Defense Department further said that Hanoi would avoid "high losses without commensurate gains" because it knew that "the effort necessary to support large-scale fighting results in a serious weakening of the ideological struggle in both North and South Vietnam."

Serious disagreements also divided U.S. agencies in their evaluations of enemy strength in South Vietnam. As the study shows, the U.S. military establishment generally underestimated enemy forces because it "consistently down-graded" Communist units not "regularly committed to offensive action."

In the view of U.S. military analysts, these Communist units were also disregarded because

"their shadowy nature makes it impossible for us to quantify their strength with any precision."

The CIA and State Department disputed the calculations of the Pentagon and the U.S. command in Saigon. The dispute apparently reached such proportions that inter-agency conferences were called in September 1967 in Saigon and in Washington eight months later to attempt to reconcile the conflict. The second conference was convened by CIA Director Richard Helms.

But, according to the White House study, the agencies "failed to reach agreement on the elements included in the estimates of enemy strength." At the time the study was compiled, therefore, the CIA estimate of Communist strength exceeded that of the Pentagon by about 90,000.

The CIA and the Pentagon also disagreed "strongly" on the importance of the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville as a channel of supplies for the Communists. The Pentagon considered Sihanoukville to be vital to the Communists, while the CIA regarded the port as a relatively unimportant enemy asset.

The Pentagon said that the complicity of members of the Cambodian army in the arms traffic to the enemy "has been well established." The commander of the Cambodian army at the time, Gen. Lon Nol, later overthrew Cambodia's chief of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Lon Nol's government now receives about \$300 million per year in U.S. military aid.